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AZTEC ART - Part 1

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INTRODUCTION

A main function of Aztec Art was to express religious and mythical concepts to legitimize the power of the State. This artistic language spoke predominantly through the form of iconographic symbols and metaphors. For example, the image of the eagle symbolized the warrior and the sun at its zenith. Images of serpents were linked to the gods Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli, and thus were represented as water or fire serpents, respectively. Representations of frogs as aquatic beings were also reminiscent of Tlaloc. The conch shell was related to fertility, life, and creation. As indicated by Heyden and Villaseñor (1994), sculpture served as communication through visual metaphors, which were realized with a purity of techniques that allowed for refinement of detail.

It is unwise and misleading for modern Western scholars to label most forms of Aztec expression as fine art. Vaillant (1938) mentions that the Aztecs, like many ancient nonwestern civilizations, did not have a word to describe fine art, and that they did not argue over questions of aesthetics; nor did they create objects to be observed for their own sake. Instead they created objects intended to serve a well-defined function--to indoctrinate standard religious, political, and military imperatives. Understanding the artistic principles of the ancient indigenous past is difficult given our own cultural biases

and our own definitions of an artistic world. But it is easy to recognize that the Mexica appreciated beauty in terms of their own culturally dictated standards.

THE AZTEC ARTISTS AND CRAFTSMEN

Though historians and European chroniclers found reasons to document information describing the daily life of Emperors, members of the imperial family, and warriors, there is little information about the day-to-day life of Aztec artisans and craftsmen despite the fact that artists at Tenochtitlan and other Aztec cities constituted a numerous class with its own quarters and organizations; they preserved the class below that of the *pochteca* (long-distance merchants), though they were in some respects affiliated to the upper classes. Not so much is known about the guilds of the quarrymen, who are sometimes mentioned in ethnohistorical sources without much detail. The only groups of artists that were much taken into account were those associated with the decorative arts: the goldsmiths, the jewelers, and the *amanteca* (feather-workers). They used various tools of stone, copper and wood, and wet sand for the abrasion of jade and crystal. Soustelle (1979) states that gold (*teocuitlatl*), silver, amber, crystal, pearls, and amethysts were popular materials for creating rich jewels, and vibrantly dyed feathers decorated fine clothing. Most importantly, they had an infinite amount of patience to any unique cannon dictated by their rulers and religious leaders.

According to Soustelle (1979), these people were named *tolteca* (the Toltecs) because the origins of their art-work were traditionally associated to the ancient Toltec civilization, whom the Aztecs venerated as their forefathers over the centuries.

Tolteca

Initially, the Aztecs were a nomadic tribe with no craftsmen or artists that arrived to the Valley of Mexico in the year 1325, overpowering the citizens of small settlements, such as Colhuacan or Xochimilco, which preserved the ancient art traditions of Tula (the Toltec capital) after its fall, along with its language and customs. According to Sahagún (1951-1969, Book 3), the Toltecs, meaning literally a group of skilled craftsmen, were all

very skilled artisans. To be referred to as a *tolteca*, or Toltec, was an honor for Aztec artisans; it served as a reminder that as craftsmen they were members of the artistic traditions of a golden era. Aztec craftsmen were inspired by their Toltec ancestors, who created magnificent feather mosaics, worked gold and other precious metals, and carved stone to create monumental sculptures for their kings and gods

As Aztec rulers expanded the political boundaries under their control, reaching even the remote tropical regions, wealth began to accumulate rapidly and artisans grew in social status as they became more in demand. The *tolteca* class provided artisans and their families with certain privileges that common people did not possess. However, most artisans did not rise from their own stations to any positions of considerable power, and so they maintained peaceful relationships with the ruling class. Presumably artists, given their unique talents, preferred to stay in their positions where they were respected and admired for their abilities.

Artisans who worked directly for the Aztec ruler performed their jobs either inside the palace and or in their own homes, where raw materials such as stones, feathers, or precious metals could be sent. But they did not work alone. Interestingly, the artist's workshop witnessed the entire family's participation. Each family member worked in prescribed roles to complete pieces. For example, the wife of an artist wove blankets with the rabbit hair, dyed feathers, and embroidered clothing, depending on the profession of her husband. Children in such households would learn and inherit the artistic traditions of their parents.

Accounts regarding an artist's salary are rare. One account reveals that artisans were well paid for their work. The stone sculpture of Motecuhzoma II was executed by fourteen sculptors who were paid with clothing for their wives and themselves, cotton, ten loads of calabashes, and maize given as an advance. After the work was completed, they were each given two servants, cocoa, crockery, salt, and more clothing. Although artists may have been given good compensation, they were also taxed; however, they were not required to give personal service or any agricultural labor. And if legal disputes arose, the *tolteca* class had chiefs who represented them before the

authority of the law.

MONUMENTAL STONE SCULPTURE

Aztec sculpture was not the result of random inspiration but a monumental synthesis of religious and cultural concepts. An important characteristic of Aztec sculpture is the abstraction of whole images that retain realistic, concrete details. Sculptures represented their myths, dreams, and illusions of life and death [Fig. 1]. Monumentality was another important trend in Aztec sculpting. However, monumental art was not just the representation of something massive and enormous; it was the visual symbol of force of an idea, simply executed and manifested in the relationship between dimensions. Aztec monumentality awed and frightened the spectator and imposed a manipulated impression of power that the State invested in all Aztec art.

Ocelotl-Cuauhxicalli

A vessel in the form of a jaguar, the *Ocelotl-Cuauhxicalli* was used to store the hearts of sacrificed victims [Fig. 2]. On the inside bottom of the *cuauhxicalli* (vessel of the eagles), two figures with striped bodies and skeletal jaws are piercing their ears with sharp bones. The rim of the vessel is composed of concentric circles conveying jades with eagle feathers. In a general sense, this colossal *ocelotl-cuauhxicalli* is a monument dedicated to the underworld, the earth, and the deified kings of the past.

According to Pasztory (1983), the great power of the jaguar is shown in this vessel without its grace and swiftness, a somber version of an otherwise vivacious animal. As a vessel related to the act of sacrifice and death, the jaguar represents the god of the earth, where the corpse would be buried, and the underworld, where the soul of the dead would travel. The image of the *ocelotl*, or jaguar, stands for the earth receiving sacrificial offerings. Jaguars were also icons of royalty and status symbols. Rulers wore jaguar skins and were associated with the feline. Artists might have witnessed the jaguar first hand in the zoos of Motecuhzoma II and other Aztec kings.

The two skeletal figures inside the vessel probably indicate the importance of ancestry

the Mexica people. They are shown with the smoking mirror foot of Tezcatlipoca, god of the many forms and protector of warriors, who possibly represents dead kings of past civilizations disguised as deities. They also extract blood from their ears utilizing blood-letting implements similar to the ones used in the penitential rituals performed by the ancient Aztec kings, another sign that they are symbols of ancestry. As Esther Pasztory points out, ultimately, the vessel, commissioned by Motecuhzoma II, links his own reign with the gods of the past.

Cuauhtli-Cuauhxicalli

The Cuauhtli-Cuauhxicalli, like the Ocelotl- Cuauhxicalli, was sculpted in the form of an animal--the eagle. The circular hole in the back of the figure indicates that this sculpture was a *cuauhxicalli*, or sacrificial vessel. According to Matos and Solís (2002), the Cuauhtli-Cuauhxicalli stored the hearts and blood of the sacrificed victims so that the deities, descending from the heavens, could feed themselves on the offerings [\[Fig. 3\]](#).

In ancient Mexico, the *cuauhtli* (eagle) symbolized both the sun and a strong warrior who fought the powers of the night under the direction of his patron deity Huitzilopochtli, the god of war. The eagle was an important symbol in ancient times since it was responsible for feeding the sun with the hearts and blood of the sacrificed victims, which gave the sun its energy to make its daily journey across the sky. This vessel points to a vital belief encompassed in the Aztec worldview--that life and death are joined. Death must occur so that life can exist, making human sacrifice a necessary component in ensuring the survival of both the sun and the universe, and consequently, human life.

This offering vessel is a magnificent example of the fine artistry of the Aztec sculptor. Sculpted as if the artist wanted to imitate in stone the real bird, the eagle eye is surrounded by delicate feathers while the tail is made of longer feathers that fall vertically. The details of the vessel are rich in texture and form.

Dedication Stone

This skillfully carved greenstone plaque was made in commemoration of the completion of the Temple of Huitzilopochtli at Tenochitlan in the year 8 Reed or 1487 [\[Fig. 4\]](#). Where this panel was located originally is still unknown, but relief panels with dates, such as this one, were usually set into architecture like stairways and pyramid

platforms. Very similar stones have been found in the Great Temple of Tenochitlan and this plaque was probably a part of those.

In the lower half of the stone, the glyph 8 Reed is carved in an abstract design with double outlines. The upper half of the stone is similar to the carvings in the Bench Relief and the Stone of Tizoc. In the plaque, the rulers Ahuitzotl and Tizoc are dressed up as priests holding incense bags and piercing their ears with a bone. Tizoc was in power between 1481 and 1486, and his brother Ahuitzotl succeeded him and ruled from 1486 to 1502. Blood is flowing from their heads into an incense burner and is represented as a serpent into the maw of the earth monster border. Between the two Emperors, there is a grass ball of sacrifice, or *zacatapayolli*, with the bone piercers or *maguey* thorns used for auto-sacrifice (blood-letting) stuck in it. Also, streams of blood are flowing from the wounds in each of their legs. Both kings are identified by their own glyphs: Tizoc by his “bleeding leg” glyph and Ahuitzotl by the water being with a curly tail. The two kings appear in profile, with their heads and legs pointing sideways, while their torsos appear in a full frontal view. They are barefoot, which is a symbol of divinity. Above the two men, the date 7 Reed appears, whose meaning is unclear.

This stone depicts an act of devotion. According to Matos and Solís (2002), the Aztecs believed that humans could achieve immortality by their good actions, such as devotion acts performed for the gods. Expanding the Great Temple of Tenochitlan, dedicated to the patron Mexica gods Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, was the duty of every ruler or *tlatoani*. This plaque reveals the same sentiment. Tizoc began expanding the Great Temple and his brother Ahuitzotl finished the completion of the project. Also, both emperors are performing an act of sacrifice, which involves the offering of *maguey* thorns or bone piercers covered with their own blood and inserted in a *zacatapayolli* to mother Earth.

Stone of the Warriors

Discovered in 1897 near the main square in Mexico City, the Stone of the Warriors is full of reliefs of warriors in procession holding their weapons [Fig. 5]. As described by Pasztory (1983), the soldiers approach a symbol of sacrifice fully armed for battle, each wearing a different headdress; they approach the grass ball, or *zacatapayolli*. It is

possible that a ruler at one time stood next to the grass ball, but time has abraded the stone making it unclear. These 14 carved warriors might represent the City of Tenochtitlan and even the Aztec Empire's mighty power and strength.

On top of the sculpture, the earth monster image (either Tlaltecuhltli or Itzpapalotl) is carved, symbolizing the devourer of human blood and hearts. The earth covers the physical bodies of the dead and feeds on them, and it requires the sacred liquid of blood to be in balance with the universe.

The Stone of the Warriors probably served at one time as an altar or a throne owing to the fact that the depression in the center was made during the colonial period.

Bench Relief

Until an early Chacmool sculpture was found, the Bench Relief was thought to be one of the earliest Aztecs sculptures ever found [\[Fig. 6\]](#).

According to Pasztory (1983), the Bench Relief is composed of 52 panels that were taken away and re-used to reconstruct buildings in Tenochtitlan. There is the important emblem depicted in the central stones of the monument, which shows the grass ball of sacrifice (*zacatapayolli*) stuck with thorns and human bones used to draw blood. Two warriors surround the sacrificial grass ball of thorns. These warriors belong to a high rank in Aztec society suggested by their clothing, such as their three types of headdresses, one with the turquoise diadem of a chief, a headdress of feathers associated with a lord, and a two feather headdress, which indicate a high position. The warriors are also carrying such weapons as spear throwers (*atlatl*), spears, and shields. All the images represent humans, except for the one on the left, who has a leg ending in a representation of smoke rather than a human leg. According to Pasztory (1983), the figure with the smoke leg is mixing human and divine features. The person with divine features is disguised as the god Tezcatlipoca, with the smoking mirror on his hair and he is leading the other Aztec noble-warriors to battle. The nose bar, as well as his turquoise diadem headdress, is symbols of royalty. The figure on the left might represent a king of Tenochtitlan, possibly Motecuhzoma I who is praying, as suggested

by the curled flower design in front of his face. If this is so, then the monument's date range between 1440 and 1469.

There are only a few traces of the stucco paint used to decorate the Bench Relief. The Aztecs might have made an imitation, in this relief, of a Toltec bench relief, since it is closely similar to Toltec prototypes. The Tula bench relief in the Burnt Palace also depicts a procession of warriors with feathered serpent borders. An Aztec trend in this relief is the grass ball of sacrifice in the center, serving as a penitential symbol and an emphasis on the image of the Aztec ruler.

Teocalli of the Sacred War (Temple Stone)

The Temple Stone, named the *teocalli* (temple) of the Sacred War by Alfonso Caso, is a commemoration to the New Fire Ceremony of 1507, the sacred war, and the imperial power of the Mexica [\[Fig. 7\]](#).

The Temple Stone is composed of sixteen images and six glyphs on both of its sides, taking the shape of an Aztec temple. A scene of a natural world with an eagle and a cactus on the back of the sculpture alludes to the founding of Tenochtitlan [\[Fig. 8\]](#). According to the migration legend, the patron god Huitzilopochtli told them to build a settlement in the place where they would see an eagle landing on a cactus growing on a lake [\[Fig.9\]](#). When the Mexica saw the vision, they founded Tenochtitlan on Lake Tetzaco.

On top of this colossal monument there is the date 2 House (1325), indicating that this was the date of the traditional founding of the Aztec capital. The entire monument symbolizes the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan, rising from Lake Tetzaco. The monument itself is mixing the elements of a royal throne, a temple, and a year bundle. For the Aztecs, a main temple of a city represented the city's symbol and in manuscripts, a burning temple represents that the city has been conquered. In Mesoamerica, temples were shaped in the form of pyramids symbolizing the mountains, where fertility and creation happens, where the wombs of creation are kept, which are the caves themselves. The word city in Nahuatl is *altepetl*, which means "water-mountain."

Some scholars suggest that the Temple Stone was in fact a royal throne of iconographical meaning. This monument was found in Moctezuma II's palace in 1831 and might have served as his symbolic or actual throne. The sculpture also is related to year bundles representing the 52 years of an Aztec century. The year 2 Reed (glyph of the New Fire Ceremony), 1 Flint knife, and 1 Death are represented in the stone sculpture. According to Pasztory (1983), during important feasts, the year bundles were used as seats for the nobility, thus making the Temple Stone a royal throne, a symbol of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan as a mountain pyramid, and the 52 years cycle. At the top of the stone there is a sun disk showing the glyph 4 Movement. The disk is flanked by a god, or a priest dressed as the god Huitzilopochtli in the left, and by Moctezuma II on the right [Fig.7]. The sun disk symbolizes the Aztec dedication to a solar cult and a new era of their rule. Both god and human king carry sacrificial knives and bones for drawing blood. A grass ball of sacrifice full of thorns to draw blood, appear on top of the solar disk. In a sense, the Temple Stone is itself being crowned by an Aztec Emperor and a patron deity, who are drawing sacrificial blood as a solar symbol for light, life, and time.

Opposing this image of life is the representation of death below the sun disk on top of the seat. Below the sun disk, lies the Earth Monster (Tlaltecuhltli) with a skull belt symbolizing the voracious power of the earth. Furthermore, the Earth Monster is flanked in the sides by weaponry, such as shields, spears, and war banners, all of them representing emblems of war. The *cuauhxicalli* vessels, which are being represented for the first time in a royal monument, are adorned with eagle feathers and jaguar spots, thus making them symbols to the Aztec warrior orders of the eagle and the jaguar. So, the sculpture is a monument to the sacred war in which the Mexica are conquering the Earth.

On both sides of the stone sculpture, is a pair of seated images with skeletal jaws wearing triangular loincloths and feather headdresses, typical of Aztec warrior regalia [Fig. 10]. They might represent the ancestors of the Aztecs, the ancient rulers prior to the Mexica conquest, or the Aztec deities, since the image on the left has that moustache and those goggles attributed to the rain god Tlaloc. Another figure has a

royal diadem, and he is either a ruler or the fire god Xiuhtecuhtli. The Aztecs associated Tlaloc and Xiuhtecuhtli to older civilizations, especially with the Toltecs; they believed that Tlaloc was the patron god of the Toltecs. The Aztecs understood the importance of honoring their ancestors and sought to find their spiritual support for the Empire. According to Pasztory (1983), when someone, such as Moctezuma II, sat in this royal throne, in a symbolical way he might have been resting on top of the earth, the underworld, and on his back, he carried the sun and the ancient past of the ancestors. Also, the glyph representing the 1 Flint knife, next to Huitzilopochtli, is the mythical date in which the Aztecs began their migration from Aztlan. Motecuhzoma II is glorifying his heritage and his ancestors by wearing a headdress of plumes tied to sticks. This was the headdress wore by the nomadic Chichimec ancestors of the Mexica. The Temple Stone embodies the concept of unbreakable continuity of Aztec and Toltec dominations, and the right of the Aztecs to supersede the Toltec civilization by conquest, sacrificial death, and by the divine guidance of Huitzilopochtli.

The Sun Stone

Carved in the late Post-Classic period, 1479, the year 13 *acatl*, during the reign of the sixth emperor Axayacatl, this very elaborate monument to the sun in its many manifestations is also known as the Calendar Stone and as the Aztec Calendar, though in reality it was never used as a calendar [\[Fig. 11\]](#). The stone also represents human sacrifice related to the cult of Tonatiuh, god of the sun.

At the center of the Sun Stone, the wrinkled face of a blond-haired Tonatiuh is depicted with his tongue ravenously hanging from his mouth in the shape of an obsidian sacrificial knife. (Some scholars think that the deity is actually Tlaltecuhltli, the night sun of the underworld). His wrinkles indicate his old age, and his blond hair associates him with the golden sun. But it is his tongue that links him so graphically to human sacrifice, so hungry is it for human blood [\[Fig. 12\]](#).

Tonatiuh is surrounded by the symbol *Nahui Ollin*, the date on which the current sun of motion (the Fifth Sun) was created in Teotihuacan. In the four flanges of the *Ollin* sign appear the names of the four previous creations, which are Four Jaguar, Four Wind,

Four Rain, and Four Water. Adjacent to the flanges, the four directions or cardinal points of the Universe are represented like a cosmological map. The North is a warrior's headdress, which symbolizes the military power of the Mexica and their growing Empire. The South is a monkey and represents a part of one of the previous suns or ages in the myth of creation. The East is an obsidian dagger or *tecpatl* representing human sacrifice. The West is the Tlalocan, the house of the rain-god Tlaloc, and symbolizes water, essential for human survival.

In the next outer circle are shown the 20 days of the month. The Solar Calendar was composed of 18 periods of 20 days plus five days called *nemontemi* (useless and nameless). Starting from the position of the symbol of the North and heading clockwise, the Nahuatl names of the months correspond to the figure carved in each box that forms the circle. In order, they are: *Cipactli* (Crocodile), *Ehecatl* (Wind), *Calli* (House), *Cuetzpallin* (Lizard), *Coatl* (Serpent), *Miquiztli* (Death), *Mazatl* (Deer), *Tochtli* (Rabbit), *Atl* (Water), *Itzcuatl* (Dog), *Ozomatli* (Monkey), *Malinalli* (Plant, Grass), *Acatl* (Reed), *Ocelotl* (Jaguar), *Cuauhtli* (Eagle), *Cozcacuauhtli* (Vulture), *Ollin* (Movement), *Tecpatl* (Flint or Obsidian), *Quiahuitl* (Rain), and *Xochitl* (Flower). Out of this circle, eight arrowheads symbolizing the sun's rays scattering throughout the Universe point in all directions.

The outermost circle depicts the bodies of two fire serpents that encompass the Sun Stone [\[Fig. 11\]](#). These serpents symbolize the connection between the upper and lower worlds, and work like an *axis mundi* (axis) uniting the two opposite worlds. Their opened mouths at the bottom represent the underworld. Two heads emerge from their opened mouths: Quetzalcoatl, personified as Tonatiuh (the sun) on the right, and Tezcatlipoca, personified as Xiuhtecuhtli (god of the night) on the left. These two gods have their tongues out touching each other representing the continuity of time. This interaction symbolizes the everyday struggle of the gods for supremacy on Earth and in the Heavens. In other words, the tongues touching each other signify the rising and setting of the sun, which are always in contact.

The Sun Stone symbolizes the destruction of the Fifth Sun, and acts as a celebration for the creation of the world where the forces of creation and destruction play equal roles.

The iconography also suggests that the Sun Stone is a testament to Aztec victory. The glyph above the Flint knife states the day on which the Aztecs began their migration from their original homeland of Aztlan. According to Pasztory (1983), this date was historically important; in that year, 1428, the Aztecs defeated the Tepanecs and became the new rulers of the Valley of Mexico. In that context, the Sun Stone supports the belief that the reign of the Aztec Empire was to be a new era in Mesoamerica.

The Stones of Tizoc and Motecuhzoma I

The Stone of Tizoc depicts the victories of Tizoc, the Emperor during 1481-86, and is a masterpiece of intricate stone carving [Fig. 13]. Pasztory (1983), states that the monumental Stone of Tizoc is the first of its kind that was dated and associated to a known king. In 1988, a similar stone dedicated to the King Motcuhezoma I was discovered [Fig. 14]. These stones, called *temalacatl*, were very probably used for gladiatory sacrifices of important captured warriors. The cavities that they each have in the middle of a solar disc suggest that they were also used as *cuauhxicallis*, vessels where the hearts of the sacrificed victims were deposited.

In the Stone of Tizoc, the King, portrayed here in the guise of the god Tezcatlipoca, and his conquests are glorified in stone. He is identified by his glyph, the symbol for leg. At the top of the cylinder is a sun disk with eight rays. Next to the cylinder, a sky border decorates the upper part and a register conveying the maw of the earth monster borders the bottom. The frieze between the two borders portrays fifteen Aztec warriors holding captive victims by the hair. Each of the fifteen conquering warriors wears a smoking mirror in his headdress, the symbol of Tezcatlipoca, the god of shape shifting and protector of warriors. Tizoc is the only warrior wearing the hummingbird helmet of the god Huitzilopochtli.

Only one of the fifteen warriors is identified as Tizoc; the rest might have been captains under his rule [Fig. 15]. Pasztory (1983) states that the Aztecs had fifteen lords, or fifteen city districts, referred to as the *calpulli*, and the number fifteen possibly

symbolizes the Mexica's political and military divisions led by Tizoc. The captives represent their rulers since they combine human and divine attributes by dressing as their city's principal deities. Two female figures present are associated with the female patron deities of Culhuacan and Xochimilco. It was a tradition of the Aztecs to take some of the local idols of a conquered city and bring them to a special temple in Tenochtitlan. The stone suggests that these events take place in the human realm and the divine realm, in which historical Emperors conquer specific towns while the deities ensure success or failure.

According to Pasztory (1983), some of the conquests that appear on the sculpture are attributed not to Tizoc, but to his forefathers. The glyphs associated with the captured towns suggest that they stand for major Aztec conquests up to the time of Tizoc, or they might belong to some ethnic groups rather than cities. The *Codex Mendoza* attributes 14 conquests to Tizoc, but the monument probably commemorates the conquests of the Aztec expansion embodied by Emperor Tizoc.

The Stone of Tizoc was inspired by Mixtec-Puebla manuscript painting evidenced by the similarity of the sun disk border and the earth monster border to images in Mixtec-Puebla documents. Also, each of the captives is identified by their own glyphs, which indicates that they are identified in the tradition of the Mixtec-Puebla historical codices. The stone also shows that the Aztecs were deliberately imitating Toltec models by making their own imperial art. Reference to Toltec models is limited only to clothing details of the warriors, who wear the butterfly chest ornament like those worn by the *Atlantes* of Tula [Fig. 16]. However, the use of a historical image in a cosmic setting to decorate a ritual object is especially Aztec in origin, and the patron gods of the Aztecs are more emphasized in the stone.

The stone as a whole represents the Aztec empire, originated by conquest, and the commemoration of Tizoc's reign. It is interesting to notice that the glyph next to Tizoc's prisoner is that of his first campaign, Matlatlan. Ironically, Tizoc was the most unsuccessful military Mexica leader and his very first campaign in Matlatlan was a total disaster; the monument amounts to political propaganda to glorify the Aztec power.

Tizoc is better known for his major contributions to architecture, not war. The stone was probably going to belong to his new monumental architectural project that implicated the re-building of many of the temples of the sacred precinct of Tenochtitlan (See Section of Architecture).

Portrait of Motecuhzoma II

Commissioned in the year 1519, when the Emperor was 52 years old, this monumental portrait of Motecuhzoma II was carved in the cliff of the hill of Chapultepec (Hill of the Grasshopper), a sacred mountain shrine valued for its many fresh water springs [\[Fig. 17\]](#). Chapultepec was important to the Aztecs because it was the place where they first settled, chose their very first king, and made the first human sacrifice to bring the blood and hearts to the deities. The Aztec Emperors utilized this hill to make portraits of themselves carved in the living rock.

According to Pasztory (1983), the Aztec rulers wanted to erect portraits that would last longer than the images erected for the Toltec emperors. Perhaps in observance of the prophecies of his downfall, Motecuhzoma II wanted a permanent image of himself at a time close to the first news about the arrival of the Spanish explorers. Chapultepec was a place that represented the royal Aztec ancestry, and it is said that the last Toltec ruler Huemac disappeared with all of his treasures into a cave in the hill. According to Chimalpahin, Motecuhzoma was looking for Huemac's advice in dealing with the colonizers and a way to escape from them.

The monument was finished apparently in 30 days by 14 sculptors. Although the image is heavily damaged, it is clear that Motecuhzoma II is dressed in his military costume shaped like Xipek Totec, the god of agriculture and fertility and the patron deity of the workers of precious metals (See Chapter 6). At one time, the figure was life-size and very realistic, which was a characteristic in the sculpture court of Moctezuma II. He is identified by his glyph, the nose plug and royal headdress, and several dates refer to his reign: 2 Reed (1507) represents the New Fire Ceremony; the glyph 1 Crocodile, probably indicates the date of his coronation; and the date 1 Reed, 1519, when the Europeans arrived in what was to become New Spain.

Spiral Snail Shell (Caracol)

This *caracol*, or spiral snail shell, was found in the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan [Fig. 18]. The sculpture shows how skilled the artists were in the late Post Classic Period (1250-1521) to create naturalistic figures related to symbolic metaphors. It was probably used as a musical instrument (*tecciztli*) in festivities and to announce the coming of a war. The *caracol* also became an emblem of the wind when it was cut transversally (*ehecailacacozcaatl*). Surprisingly, it still shows the remains of the original stucco and blue paint that connect it to the Tlaloc shrine.

According to Matos Moctezuma and Solís (2002), in the Aztec cosmovision, the universe was a layer of water that existed under the earth, and the water was inhabited by fantastic animals like the *cipactli* or alligator. As an aspect of this watery domain, the conch shell was an important element in Aztec iconography as a symbol of fertility, life, and creation. In Mesoamerica, shells were associated with the god Tlaloc, the bringer of water and rain. Snail shells have been found next to altars, which indicate that shells might have been important for religious rituals, amulets, and offerings to Tlaloc for his blessing.

Tlaltecuhltli (Earth God)

This is the external face of the base of a *cuauhxicalli* that represents the earth monster Tlaltecuhltli [Fig. 19]. In this case, the earth god is depicted as a “diving god” with a fleshless mouth; two *chalchihuites* (precious stones) decorate his cheeks and a flint stone forms his ornamented knife-tongue. On his back he wears a skull. This monument represents the devouring power of the earth that needs the sacrifice of humans in order to maintain its life and to continue to provide fertility.

Tlaltecuhltli del Metro (Earth God)

According to Matos and Solis (2002), this sculpture was found during the construction of a Metro line in Mexico City, and because of its similarities to the statue of Coatlicue, it was thought to represent the goddess herself; therefore, it was initially named *Coatlicue del Metro* [Fig. 20]. But, recent research reveals the true identity of the sculpture: it

represents the first known depiction of Tlaltecuhltli, or Earth Lord, sculpted in the round (a sculpture given a three dimensional shape that audiences can view by walking around the sculpture).

Tlaltecuhltli poses, crossed-legged with claw-like hands, as a devourer of human remains. He wears the necklace strung with human hearts and hands and an ornament at the back with a skull, a necklace similar to that of Coatlicue. His face is similar to that in the center of the Sun Stone, which symbolizes a connection with Tlachi-Tonatiuh, or the Underground Sun. The Underground Sun was the nocturnal part of the sun's journey as it travels around the world.

Matos and Solis (2002) suggest that this god represents the embodiment of earth, which is the final place where the human remains rest. As such, this figure is also a monument for death and sacrifice, which are necessary to sustain life and persuade the gods to balance the world. According to Pasztory, the figure is an embodiment of the voracious force of the earth that needs to be fed with sacrificial human victims.

The Earth God figure shows the great skill achieved at carving in three dimensions during the reigns of Ahuitzotl and Motecuhzoma II.

Coatlicue

The masterwork of the Aztec and whole Mesoamerican stone sculpture is the spectacular representation of the goddess Coatlicue [\[Fig. 21\]](#). Coatlicue (She of the Skirt of Snakes) is the goddess of the Earth and a mother-goddess; she is at the same time a deity of fertility and destruction, uniting the duality of life and death in an overwhelming and crushing vision.

Her statue is a sublime testament of the main principle of the Aztec sculpture: abstraction of the whole and realism in detail. The figure in total represents the idea of the cosmic force that provides life and renews itself in death; she is the cosmic-religious conception of the Earth goddess in her two roles of womb and tomb. By contrast, the details of the sculpture are realistic: two serpent heads meet nose to nose to create a single impressive monstrous head; her hands appear like serpents that symbolize the

renovation of the Nature; interwoven serpents form her skirt justify her name; a necklace is strung with hands, hearts and the skull of a sacrificed victim; two breasts of an old woman hang from her chest, weary from an eternity of feeding all creatures; a thick serpent hangs between her legs forming a symbolized penis; the eyes and fangs that appear in her feet are monstrous maws that symbolize the devouring power of the Earth. There are two snakes forming her face that symbolize rivers of blood emerging from her decapitated neck, as explained by the Myth of Coatepec. She stands as a sacrificed victim.

According to Pasztory (1983), the colossal statue of Coatlicue represents the dual mind of the Aztecs. At the center of the figure there is a great contrast of opposing forces, in which the breasts are seen behind a skull, the two symbols of life and death. The sculpture is at the same time passive and active, monster and victim. Her arms are raised in a fearful gesture, and she wears a necklace of hand and heart trophies with skull pendants at the front and back.

The carving on the bottom of the sculpture is that of the god Tlaltecuhltli in his typical earth monster crouching position, and disguised as the god Tlaloc, the bringer of water [Fig. 22]. Coatlicue is Huitzilopochtli's mother, who is decapitated by the hands of her daughter Coyolxauhqui, making her the Earth mother that gave birth to the Aztecs. Another possible identification of this magnificent work of art is that of Cihuacoatl, or woman serpent, a goddess that embodies the voracious side of Earth.

Cihuacoatl was the patron goddess of Culhuacan, a Toltec-related ruling dynastic community from which the emperors of Tenochtitlan claimed to come from. Therefore, Coatlicue is the Aztec variant of Cihuacoatl, who symbolized the Toltec Earth-mother of the Mexica.

This colossal sculpture, one of the greatest surrealistic monuments in the world, should not be judged by traditional European artistic canons; its monstrous solemnity expresses the dramatic and dynamic energy of the cosmovision of a culture tragically destroyed. It can be said that the statue of Coatlicue is neither cruel nor good; it is just

the artistic manifestation of the Aztec reality of life and death, expressed in a monumental way. An almost identical sculpture known as Yollotlicue, since she wears a skirt of hearts instead of intertwined snakes, is kept in the Museum of Anthropology of Mexico City.

With the advent of the Spanish Conquest the mother goddess Coatlicue as mother of the main Aztec god Huitzilopochtli, became identified as the Virgin of Guadalupe, an indianized Virgin Mary, mother of the Christian God Jesus Christ [\[Fig. 23\]](#). This image symbolizes the identity and integration of the modern Mexican people.

Coatlicue of Coxcatlan

This figure is another monument to Coatlicue, the mother of Huitzilopochtli [\[Fig. 24\]](#). It was found in the town of Coxcatlan, in Puebla State. According to Matos and Solís (2002), the name Coatlicue means “serpent skirt,” a representation of the surface of the earth, which the Mexica believed was composed of a network of serpents. Coatlicue represents the cycle of life and death. In this image, she is shown with claw-like hands raised in an aggressive position and with a skull-like head, claiming the bodies of human beings. She is the mother-goddess of humankind, and feeds the sun and the moon and in reciprocity, she needs human sacrifice. Her turquoise ornaments and inlays are still visible. The holes on her head were probably used to insert human hair, making the sculpture life-like.

Cihuacoatl

This figure is a representation of Cihuacoatl, a powerful earth goddess [\[Fig. 25\]](#). She also represents fertility by giving life and keeping the souls of the dead. Cihuacoatl means woman serpent, which makes her a half human, half serpent deity. The divine being is shown as emerging from the maw of a snake with a long forked tongue that comes out of her mouth. Cihuacoatl is also related to Xochiquetzal, the goddess of flowers, and they are associated with the fertility of the feminine aspect of the cosmos.

The goddess Cihuacoatl also had a political significance suggested by the use of her name; *cihuacoatl* was the title for the official (prime minister) next in power of the ruler, known as the *tlatoani*. The *cihuacoatl*'s job was primarily concerned with domestic

affairs while the *tlatoani*'s position ruled over war and foreign relations. Rulership was thus divided into two offices, with the *tlatoani* in the guise of the Mexica sun god Huitzilopochtli and the *cihuacoatl* in the guise of the Toltec Earth-mother. Pasztory suggests that, this situation symbolizes a dual relationship that brings together opposing forces such as the old and the new, war and fertility, life and death, Mexica and Toltec, and conqueror and conquered.

Xiuhtecuhtli-Huitzilopochtli

The god represented in this monument is shown as a young man in ritual garb [\[Fig. 26\]](#). His hands were probably made to hold weapons or banners. This figure is also known as The Standard Bearer. According to Matos and Solís (2002), the figure is wearing the standard warrior clothing described as having a rectangular striped loincloth with a triangular cloth on top of it. He is also connected to the sun, which is represented by the sandals ornamented in the heels by solar rays and by a cape in the form of a tail of the *xiuhcoatl*, or fire serpent. He is represented as a warrior ready for battle. His calendrical name, *Nahui Cipactli* (4 Alligator) is located on the back of his head. Also, his head is full of small holes for the insertion of hair to make the figure seem more realistic, and his eyes and teeth still have their original shell and obsidian inlays. It was found in Coxcatlan, in Puebla State.

Coyolxauhqui Relief

This great oval stone, once painted in bright colors, is an impressive example of the artistic heights reached by Mexica artisans. It has a flat upper surface with the image of a dismembered goddess carved in low relief. She has been identified as the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui because of the symbols in her head: hair adorned with feathers, earplugs in the form of the fire god, and golden bells on her cheeks [\[Fig. 27a\]](#). Her face bears the band and rattles that identify her as Coyolxauhqui, meaning she of the bells or rattles on the cheeks. The goddess is depicted naked with large lactating-like breasts hanging out and folds in her belly. Her torso is surrounded by a rope belt threaded through a skull. It is important to note that the fact of her beheading and dismembering confirms her role as goddess of the moon, because those events are connected to femininity and the “mutilations” of the phases of the moon.

The severed limbs arranged in a pinwheel manner indicate that she is dead. She is in profile, with her head looking to the side and her body in a frontal view. This was an artistic device designed to show the entire body of the figure. Joints at her knees and elbows as well as her sandal heels have fanged monstrous masks. Such masks were usually related to earth-monster figures. Some forms in the sculpture stand out for their realism such as the modeled creases of the palms of the hands. Surprisingly, there are no glyphs made for this statue. Coyolxauhqui seems to be in a dynamic, almost running pose, as if sculpted in that instant of tumbling down the Mount of Coatepec beheaded and dismembered.

The location where it was found offers another aspect of its meaning. The monument was placed in the floor in front of the Temple of Huitzilopochtli with the head facing toward the stairway. It has been suggested that the sculpture might mark the conceptual center of Tenochtitlan, a point marked by sacrifice and conquest. This also might be the first image making reference to the myths of Huitzilopochtli as the main deity of the Aztecs and his triumph on the Mount of Coatepec, where he killed his sister Coyolxauhqui. This relief monument must have been a frightening reminder to any visitor to Tenochtitlan of the sacrificial death awaiting those who were considered enemies of Huitzilopochtli and his people, the Aztecs. Human sacrifice performed at the summit of the Great Temple was a ritual repetition of the execution of Coyolxauhqui, an eternal confirmation of Huitzilopochtli's power. In this way, art and architecture provided a setting for the reenactment of mythical-historical events.

Head of Coyolxauhqui

This colossal head of Coyolxauhqui, goddess of the moon, was the largest sculpture ever made using diorite, another precious stone used in Mesoamerica [\[Fig. 28\]](#). Figures of bells are carved on each of her cheeks identifying her as Coyolxauhqui. The cross with four dots indicates that the bells are made of gold. According to Pasztory (1983), the ornaments in her nose represent a day symbol, which is typical of the fire gods. The shells on top of her head are balls of down, which symbolize the sacrificial victims.

The head of the goddess is a complete work in itself; it is not a fragment of another

statue. Underneath it is carved with a relief of serpents intertwined in a river of water and fire (*atl-tlachinolli*, symbol of war), and a rope with plumes. As the goddess is decapitated, her head pours streams of blood represented by those serpents. This probably refers to a necessity to feed the gods with human sacrifices provided by warfare.

According to the legend, Coyolxauhqui was decapitated by her brother Huitzilopochtli for trying to kill Coatlicue, their mother. The sculpture represents the death of the goddess and the founding of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan under the guidance of Huitzilopochtli; the date 1 Reed is depicted in the figure, which is the date of the mythical creation of the world. This head was probably made for the dedication of the Great Temple in 1487; it is recorded that the king Ahuitzotl commissioned a figure of Coyolxauhqui for the temple.

Xochipilli (God of Flowers)

The picturesque town of Tlalmanalco, once part of the province of Chalco, is situated at the foot of the volcano Iztaccíhuatl in the Valley of Mexico and was an important pre-Columbian religious center and a region famous for its artists. According to Durán (1967), this region was one of the replicas of the Tlalocan, the exuberant paradise of Tlaloc at the lower slopes of the volcano Iztaccíhuatl, which was considered the mountain of sustenance. Here the sculpture of Xochipilli, the Aztec god of flowers, music, dance and feasting, was found [\[Fig. 29\]](#). Whether the statue depicts a priest wearing the mask of Xochipilli or whether the statue depicts the god himself is unclear.

The shallow and intricate floral reliefs on the body of Xochipilli show a pre-Columbian technique of flat and beveled carving. The flower ornaments that decorate the entire body of the figure determine the god's identification. On all sides of the pedestal of the monument are blossoming flowers with a butterfly drinking the nectar in the center representing the blossoming of the universe.

The god is sitting with his legs crossed at the ankles in a tense position, but the organic and cylindrical form of the god's muscles makes him seem more alive and dynamic. The

posture of Xochipilli suggests a shaman in hypnotical trance of hallucinogenic ecstasy. He sits in shamanic flight to Tlalocan, the exuberant paradise of fertility and abundance for the Aztecs. The carvings in his knees and the pedestal are the glyphs of the *teonanacatl*, the sacred hallucinogenic mushrooms. In diverse parts of his body are representations of other enteogenic flowers like tobacco, *ololiuhqui* or *maravilla*, *sinicuichi*, and probably *datura* or *toloache*.

This sculpture suggests that the Chalco style had a high ornamental quality.

Feathered Serpent

This sculpture portrays a snake in a coiled position with its jaw fully opened to reveal the sharpness of its teeth. This figure represents Quetzalcoatl (the Feathered Serpent), one of the most important gods in the Aztec pantheon [Fig. 30]. On top of the figure appears the date 1 Acatl, which is the year Quetzalcoatl promised to return to Earth before disappearing in the East.

The Feathered Serpent gave humans the knowledge of agriculture and of art, fundamental for their survival and the development of their soul, and the piece pays homage to his role in fertility, renewal, and transformation.

Tlaltecuhтли, the god who devours human remains, is depicted at the bottom of the sculpture. His figure juxtaposed with the Feather Serpent signifies the green surface of the earth covering the voracious underworld, making this a sculpture that celebrated the duality inherent in human endeavor—fertility stands in contrast to the sacrificial death required to sustain life.

Xiuhcoatl (Fire Serpent Head)

This colossal *xiuhcoatl* with a daunting open jaw of fangs was found near the *Ocelotl-Cuahxicalli*, or jaguar sacrificial vessel [Fig. 31]. Its size and modeling are similar to those of the colossal jaguar vessel, and so it is attributed to the reign of Motecuhzoma II. This image of the Fire Serpent was of interest to King Motecuhzoma II because of his New Fire Ceremony in 1507. According to the myth of the birth of the Aztec patron god

Huitzilopochtli, the Fire Serpent *Xiuhcoatl* was used by Huitzilopochtli to decapitate his sister, Coyolxauhqui. As such a weapon, the *xiuhcoatl* became a national and political emblem.

According to Pasztory (1983), through the serpent's fangs and open mouth curving back toward the top of the head, the sky was connected to the earth, and the heavenly bodies traveled through the body of the creature. The *xiuhcoatls* carry the sun in its daily cycle and represent the sun rays; understandably, they appear on the Calendar Stone (Sun Stone). They also symbolize the dry season in opposition to the Feather serpents (*Quetzalcoatl*) that represents the rainy, fertile season.

The Early Chacmool in the Tlaloc Shrine

Chacmools, a type of sculptural figure, have been found in various places of Mesoamerica, especially in the Toltec capital of Tula and the Maya city of Chichen Itza. Mexican versions of *chacmools* reproduce Toltec features, including the reclining posture and a receptacle, or vessel, on top of the stomach for offerings. *Chacmools* are thought to be mediators between humans and the divine.

This monument displaying a reclining male figure was discovered during the 1979 excavations of the twin pyramids (Great Temple) of Tenochtitlan on the floor of the temple dedicated to Tlaloc. [\[Fig. 32\]](#). As in Chichen Itza, this *chacmool* was set on the floor at the entrance of an important temple. This *chacmool* may represent one of the earliest examples of Aztec sculpture. According to Matos (1981), the date of the figure might be 1375-1427.

Besides being of importance for the Tlaloc temple, this figure is the first instance of an Aztec copy from the Toltec monumental arts. Pasztory (1983) asserts that *chacmool* was influenced by Toltec art and represented Toltec ancestry, since Tlaloc is also associated with the Toltec *chacmools*. In some historical accounts, the rain god Tlaloc even gave approval to the Aztecs to settle at Tenochtitlan. The *Chacmool* is not yet as realistic as later Aztec carvings and it is angular and crudely finished, like its Toltec prototypes; details were evidently painted rather than carved. The statue still preserves

its original paint, including red, blue, white, black, and yellow.

The facial aspect of this statue from Tenochtitlan is weathered by time, but it does not seem to represent a deity. As in Toltec art, the *Chacmool* is a dressed man holding a dish on his stomach. He is reclining in an uncomfortable position with raised knees while his head turns away from the temple by ninety degrees and looks over his shoulder to the horizon. It still is not known what this posture signified in either Toltec or Aztec art. A fan at the back of his neck symbolizes a fertility god. Its location in the temple and the vessel it holds may suggest that the monument served as a sacrificial stone or a place to store offerings.

Tlaloc-Chacmool

This sculpture represents a reclining man wearing necklaces, a large feather headdress, bangles and bracelets of jade with gold and copper bells as attachments. According to Matos and Solís (2002), it is also characterized by a mask over the mouth and the eyes, which connects the figure to Tlaloc [\[Fig. 33\]](#). There are many indicators of a late date for this *chacmool*, such as its complex iconography, the three-dimensionality of its carving, and the well-modeled hands and arms.

The *cuauhxicalli* (vessel for hearts) that rests on the stomach of the figure is surrounded by a relief of human hearts, and the god is in the pose of the earth god Tlaltecuhltli. The hearts and the god are surrounded by snails, symbol of fertility and life, and water creatures, which associate the figure with the sacred liquids of the Universe: blood and underground water. Water was very important for the Mesoamerican people, whose main source of sustenance was agriculture.

This figure was probably associated with Tlaloc temples because it presents the deity himself. The Aztecs became the great empire that substituted for the Toltecs, but at the same time they continued to worship them and their gods as their ancestors. This is a dual relationship in which a culture is supplanted and venerated at the same time. Pasztory (1983) states that, this *chacmool* is a Mexica reinterpretation of a Toltec art form to honor and venerate the main Toltec deity and their Toltec forefathers.

Chicomecoatl

This sculpture represents the goddess Chicomecoatl (calendrical name, Seven Serpent). She was a fertility goddess responsible of the growth of maize [Fig. 34]. She wears the *amacalli*, a square headdress adorned with two or more rosettes, which is also known as the “temple headdress.” As indicated by Matos and Solís (2002), she wears the typical female costume: an ankle-length skirt (*cueitl*) and a triangular ritual cape that falls on her chest and back (*quechquemitl*). In each hand she holds a *cinmaitl*, which is a pair of corncobs decorated with strips of paper. Chicomecoatl is associated with Xilonen, the goddess of young maize who is represented with a more simple cotton headdress and ears of corn. Xilonen represents the ripe ear of corn, and at the beginning of each harvest, the corn was collected and offered to her so that more prosperous harvests would come [Fig. 35].

As maize was the fundamental food for the sustenance of the Aztecs, there are strong conceptual and iconographic connections between Chicomecoatl and other fertility deities, such as Xochiquetzal (goddess of love and flowers), Cinteotl (young male maize god), Teteoinnan (old earth and mother goddess), and Chalchiuhtlicue (goddess of terrestrial water).

Hueheteotl

This monument is dedicated to Hueheteotl, the old fire god, one of the most ancient deities of Mesoamerica [Fig. 36]. He is always portrayed, like in this image, as a seated god with the hands on the knees, the right hand opened, and the left hand closed like a fist. His face is wrinkled and his mouth is toothless just like an old man. The fire god bends over on a sitting position with a heavy brazier over his shoulders. This monument still preserves the ancient Mesoamerican features, but with a few new elements. His face is almost hidden by a mask and his mouth has fangs, he has a great necklace with a large pendant that adorns the chest, and he also has big ear-flares.

The glyph 2 Reed is on the back of the figure and the carving of two shells surrounded by water and whirlpools are placed on top of the brazier. Because of this, the figure shows a relationship or association between the gods of fire and water, two opposites.

Huehueteotl symbolizes the old god that governed the center of the universe while maintaining the equilibrium of the cosmos.

This statue was probably a synthesis of more than one god because it holds a number of icons representing fire, water, and death. Huehueteotl is another representation of Xiuhtecuhtli, the fire god of central Mexico, who was also known as “Turquoise Lord” or “Lord of the Year.” The stone figure wears goggle eyes, a moustache-like feature, and fangs, which are characteristic traits of masks depicting Tlaloc. Also, masks with sharp teeth on his elbows and knees are similar to those that adorn Coyolxauhqui and Tlaltecuhltli, which might symbolize a passage to the underworld. The origins of god Huehueteotl can be traced to earlier civilizations like Cuicuilco and Teotihuacan. This Aztec version of the Old God was found north of the Great Temple, near the Red Temple, which also has features of Teotihuacan; as such, the stone god shows the Mexica appropriation of the Teotihuacan past.

Cihuateotl (Deified Woman)

Found in a temple dedicated to women who died giving birth, this *Cihuateotl* (Deified Woman) has the face of the living dead [\[Fig. 37\]](#). The hands of this macabre figure have jaguar claws that are raised aggressively, as if to grab someone, and she has the tangled hair of a corpse. These deified women (*cihuateteo*) were considered to be the female counterparts of the male warriors in the Mexica society [\[Fig. 38\]](#). For the Aztecs, women who died at childbirth were given the highest honor of accompanying the sun from its midday zenith to its setting on the West, just like the warriors who gave their lives in battles and accompanied the sun from its rising to noon.

It was believed that the *cihuateteo* lived in the western horizon, or *Cihuatlampa* (place of women). They were admired especially by young warriors, but at the same time they were feared because they were considered evil spirits. It was thought that they haunted crossroads at night and were dangerous to young children, since they had been deprived to being mothers themselves. This is probably the origin of the modern legend of *La Llorona* (the crying woman), who wanders by night in the towns of Mexico looking for her lost children.

Altar of the Planet Venus

The altar of Venus that is represented here is depicted as a three-lobed figure, which is a symbol that identifies this planet in other reliefs and codices [\[Fig. 39\]](#). The Aztecs believed that the 13 celestial realms that formed the universe served as a field of action of heavenly bodies. According to Matos and Solis (2002), the Aztecs attributed a special significance to the planet Venus because of its year cycle of 584 days, which has two phases when it is invisible and another two phases when it is the last star to disappear in the morning and the first one to appear at dusk. This altar is like a prism with four sides. The upper register, or band, is a sequence of spheres that represent the canopy of stars. In the lower band Venus is shown with half closed eyes in her nocturnal nature with monstrous jaws. Four *tecpatl* (flint) knives with faces jut from the personified star. There are two additional flint knives that commemorate the sacrifice of Venus when it was pierced by the sun with an arrow.

Altar of Itzpapalotl (Obsidian Butterfly)

In contrast with relief carving, platforms or altars have sides that are also composed of carvings [\[Fig. 40\]](#). This altar shows Itzpapalotl, a big butterfly with wings decorated with obsidian knives, which hold bleeding human hearts in its human hands. The monument probably represents the importance of sacrificial death to maintain a balance in life and the *tzitzimime* (female monsters of destruction).

These creatures of destruction were among the most feared of all supernatural beings as they were considered to be stars that transformed themselves into “demons” (evil spirits) who descended from the sky to devour human beings during certain calendrical and celestial events (solar eclipses). Itzpapalotl was primary among these deities and was associated with springtime and sacrifice.

Ahuitzotl Box

This box features three-dimensional carving and relief decorations similar to the works executed under the reign of Motecuhzoma II. The water monster that appears in three dimensions on the top and in relief inside of the box represents the king Ahuitzotl, a ruler-priest expected to perform penitential rites involving the drawing of blood. There is a figure of the water god Tlaloc, who is pouring this sacred liquid and ears of corn from

a jade vessel. There is a river of the fertilizing water surrounding the animal image of the king, probably representing his connection to lineage fertility and sustenance. This box was probably used as a container for blood-letting implements because it is full of sacrificial symbolism. The box was a container to protect the sacred blood of the ruler. The box was possibly made in the year 1499, since the date 7 Reed appears inside the stone lid.

Tepetlacalli (Stone Box) with Figure Drawing Blood and Zacatapayolli

The *tepetlacalli* (stone boxes) might have been inspired by utilitarian wooden or mat boxes since this type of sculpture is unique to Aztec art [Fig. 41]. These boxes have many functions such as containers for carrying elite dead ashes, thorns used in blood-letting rituals, and for storing assorted offerings. Molina's Nahuatl dictionary defines the stone boxes as coffins or caskets, and this ethnohistorical source serves as evidence that these boxes were used as to keep the ashes of cremated individuals. In the base of every stone box, including this one, a carving of the Earth Monster always appears as the voracious power of the earth always hungry for human remains. This particular box is full of images associated with penitential rites, such as an individual drawing blood from his ear with a thorn and a fire serpent in the background. Present is also a *zacatapayolli*, the grass ball used to keep the sacrificial bones.

Stone Box of Motecuhzoma II

The stone boxes with calendrical symbols served in special rites for certain deities and or in the households of the emperor and nobility. The ruler's name, in this case Motecuhzoma II, usually appears on the box along with significant dates of his reign [Fig. 42]. This box has eight *quincunces* (cosmic diagram with 5 points) on the outside, which symbolizes the Aztec universe. According to Matos and Solís (2002), some scholars believe that the box probably stored the remains of King Motecuhzoma II, since the carvings inside of the lid depict his name-glyph, the speaking *xihuitzolli o copilli* (royal headdress) and a design showing his hair, a nose-ornament made of turquoise, and a decorated speech scroll, an emblem of *tlatoani*, meaning he who speaks. Also, the date 11 Flint (1516) depicted on the lid is the year in which Netzahualpilli, the ruler of Tetzaco, died. According to Umberger, this date may

indicate that this stone box was a present given by Motecuhzoma II at the death of the Tetzcoacan lord, who was a close friend.

Head of an Eagle Warrior

In the Aztec army's higher ranks, there were two orders: the Eagle and the Jaguar warriors [Fig. 43]. Usually only members of the nobility could belong to these two orders. The *Cuauhtli* (Eagle) knights were associated with the sun and with daytime battles. For the Mexica, the eagle symbolized the sun at its zenith as well as the warrior. Their job was to nourish the sun by sacrificing their own blood, thus making them resistant to pain and capable of risking their own life unconditionally.

This statue presents the head of a young warrior with an eagle helmet, which in pre-Columbian times would have been covered with eagle feathers and made out of wood. The sculpture shows the Aztec ideal in facial features seen in many stone works of heads and masks. The eyes might have been inlaid with shells, and dog's teeth might have been inserted into the holes in his mouth. The dog's fangs were probably used to intimidate others and show the warrior's ferocity and strength. The sculpture is also linked to the fire god Xiuhtecuhtli by the paper bow on the neck, which is also a mark indicating the appropriate lineage for an eagle or jaguar warrior.

Jaguar Warrior

This man with a Jaguar Helmet is believed to be a warrior of the Aztec Jaguar Order, just like the Eagle knights of the Eagle Order [Fig. 44]. This warrior wears a folded paper fan on the back of his head that connects him to the fertility and nature deities. He also has a collar imitating jade jewelry like those of the rain god *Chacmool*.

According to Pasztory (1983), this feline helmet is associated to deities such as Tepeyollotl, who is the jaguar form of the god Tezcatlipoca. Tepeyollotl, meaning the heart of the mountain, is a deity related to earth and nature, which connects him to the gods of the ancient past. Also, the jaguar symbolizes caves and the interior of the earth, which associates the feline with fertility since the caves are the wombs of the mountains where creation happened. The jewelry is emphasized in this sculpture; the greenstones were found in caves and guarded by ancient deified Toltec kings and rain gods.

Atlantean Warriors

This group of five colossal sculptures of warriors represents the Aztec vision of the universe, inspired in the famous Toltec *Atlantes* of Tula [Fig. 16]. Their military character is suggested by their spears, spear-throwers, and their clay-nose bars [Fig. 45]. They are warriors ready for battle and eager to feed the gods with human blood so that the universe stays in a constant balance. According to Matos and Solís (2002) the sculptures represent warriors who support the creations of the gods by military actions. Four of the sculptures that were found in Tenochtitlan are male; the fifth is female. One of the warriors is bearded and is supposed to guard the center of the Cosmos. The other 3 males mark the North, East and South; meanwhile the female warrior stays in the West, which is the *cihuatlampa* (place of women). Together they create a *quincunx*, the four cardinal points that were the four directions of the universe, plus a center.

These possibly deified warriors that guard the sun in its celestial realm resemble Toltec models such as those *Atlantes* of Tula; they have in the center of their bodies, as well as their helmets, the butterfly pectoral of Toltec warriors.

Feathered Coyote

This monument is the depiction of a coyote sitting on his back and covered in a fur of feathers that symbolize motion and movement. The image of the coyote, which was not usually carved in sculpture in the round, was a patron of the Aztec elite knight orders, since like the jaguar and eagle; the coyote was a powerful predator [Fig. 46]. According to Matos and Solís (2002), the coyote was connected to Tezcatlipoca, who was the god of masculinity and war, thus making the animal a symbol of sexual male potency and fertility.

The Acolman Cross (Colonial Period, 1550)

The most astonishing *tequitqui* monument in the town of Acolman is the atrial cross (a monumental stone cross located in the center of the plaza before the church) [Fig. 47]. The Acolman cross features at its top the INRI (Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews) inscription, under which lies the Augustinian emblem of the arrow-pierced heart, an impressive realistic head of Christ in bulk at the intersection of the arms and the shaft, a

chalice, pliers, a ladder, the spear, a palm leaf, a human bone, and a skull. The arms of the cross are decorated with vegetal motifs like flowers, vines and leaves. Each arm ends with a stylized *fleur-de-lys*. The base that supports the cross intends to emphasize the theme of Calvary, showing a crude image of the Virgin of the Sorrows surrounded by native iconography explained further below [\[Fig. 48\]](#).

Although there are precedents in Europe for open-air crosses along roads or in town squares, the Mexican crosses have a different iconography and an indigenous aesthetic. The atrial cross of Acolman provides, like all atrial crosses in general, a dual system of meanings: the Christian and the pagan. The cross is the central symbol of Christianity and represents the death of Christ, who with his resurrection made possible the redemption of human beings. The cross reflected the doctrine taught by the friars, but the very rooted idolatry induced the Indians to bury images of their gods underneath the atrial crosses and persist in the practice of old rituals. In time, these would become syncretic with the new religion.

At the same time, the Indians understood the Christian cross at the center of the atrio as another representation of the World Tree, or Tree of Life. It was the Axis Mundi that connected the gods of the Upperworld and Underworld with the human beings on the surface of the earth. The cosmogram was completed with the four *posa* chapels to represent the four corners of the Universe.

In the Mesoamerican vision of the World, the cycle of planting and harvesting of the maize became sacred because it was the main source of sustenance for the human beings. At the same time the cycle of the maize was a metaphor for the death and rebirth of the humankind. When a maize seed was planted in the soil, it died, but from it a living plant emerged. It implied that from death life will come, a process that was energized by the earth that lies in the Underworld. In the same way, the people would die in order to rise again exactly like the Maize God, Cinteotl.

This agricultural and cosmological belief was somewhat compatible with the Christian idea that God came to the world incarnated as Jesus Christ, suffered greatly, and died

as a human man. Three days later, he was resurrected, and the blood of his sacrifice on the cross redeemed and granted eternal paradise to believing human beings. For the Indian in the midst of conversion, Christ was the Maize God and the Cross was the maize plant. The *fleurs-de-lys* at the end of the arms of the cross were the sprouts of the maize plant that represented the endless rebirth of fertility and life. The carved flowers, vines and leaves that decorate the arms were the vines of beans and squash that the peasants grow together with the maize stalks in the *milpas* (corn fields) to facilitate a healthier development of the habitat of the crops. The cross rising from Calvary reflects the mountain on the earth where Christ defeated Death. In the same way the maize plant (foliated cross) rises from the “monster of earth” where death is transformed to life.

At the foot of the Acolman cross lies a crude image of the Virgin of the Sorrows (La Dolorosa) that clearly reflects Christian features: crossed hands and shrouded head. The style, with which she is carved, however, distinctly resembles an Indian idol as such, she becomes a Christianized Coatlicue or Teteoinnan, and the disk on her chest recalls the Aztec practice of inseting a jade or obsidian stone over the hearts of their idols symbolizing their vital energy. From a Christian view point the disk could be a wafer that together with the small chalice that appears under her hands are symbols of the Eucharist. The idea of communion with God through the partaking of His flesh and blood had some parallel with the Aztec practice of ritual cannibalism and human sacrifice. In both cases there was communion with the Divinity, but in the Christian rite it is symbolic, while in the Aztec one it was a physical performance.

To the left of the Virgin there is a skull that makes reference to her presence in Golgotha (Place of the Skull), the Hebrew name for Calvary. At the feet of the Virgin there is a terrestrial sphere and a serpent, two symbols linked to the Immaculate Conception (La Purísima). In the eschatological mentality of the Augustinians, this apocalyptic association probably was intended to remind the Indians that the new religion destroyed the old one of Quetzalcoatl (serpent) and would reign over the earth. This is the same meaning of the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe [\[Fig. 23\]](#), the name that was given to the Virgin Mary owing to the possible misunderstanding of the

Nahuatl language by the Archbishop Zumárraga or some other Spanish witness. According to the tradition he heard the name “María de Guadalupe,” the name of a Virgin Mary already venerated in Spain. It seems that the original words were “María tecoatlaxopeuh,” meaning Mary, the one that will destroy the stone serpent (Altamirano 1884). This action of stepping on the serpent is a common image of the Immaculate Conception in European images; in the indigenous world it refers to the destruction of Quetzalcoatl (stone serpent) and the triumph of the Christian religion against idolatry.



Figure 1. Stone Skull in Santa Cecilia Acatitlan (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 2. Ocelotl-Cuauhxicalli (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 3. Cuauhtli-Cuauhxicalli (photo Fernando González y González).

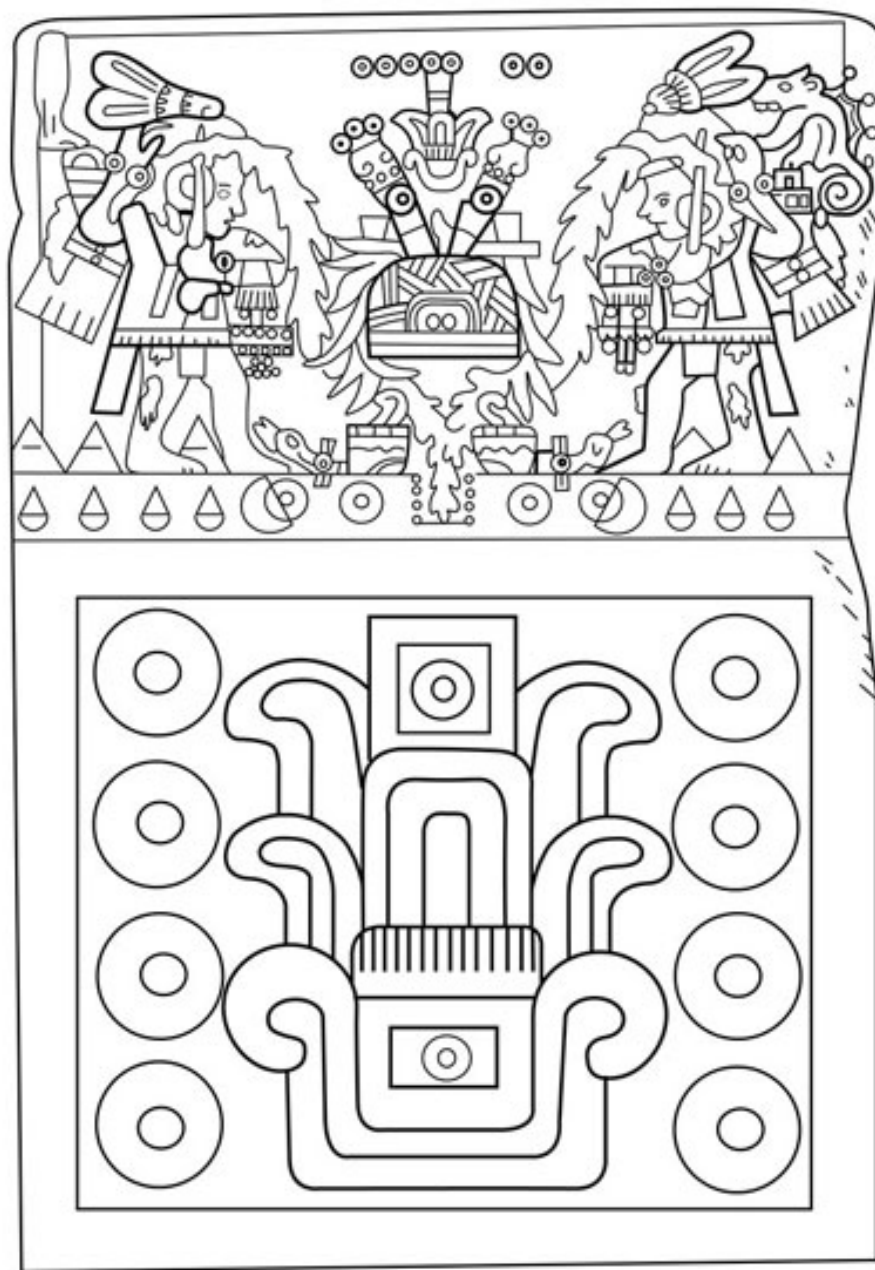


Figure 4. Dedication Stone of Tizoc and Ahuitzotl (drawing Lluvia Arras).



Figure 5. Stone of the Warriors (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 6. Bench Relief (photo Fernando González y González).

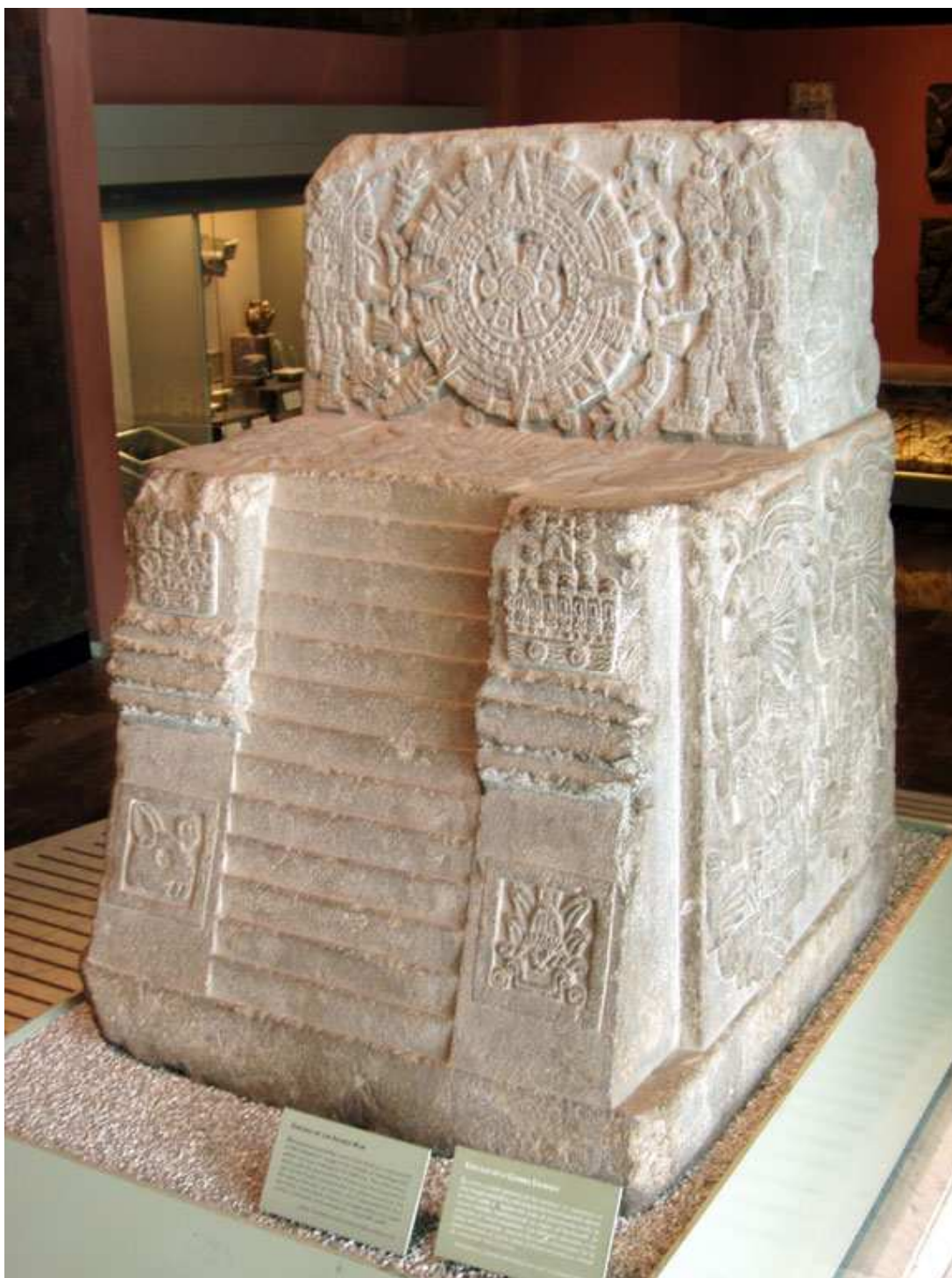


Figure 7. Temple Stone (photo Manuel Aguilar-Moreno).



Figure 8. Back of the Temple Stone (photo Manuel Aguilar-Moreno).



Figure 9. Foundation of Tenochtitlan from Codex Mendoza (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 10. Side of Temple Stone (photo Manuel Aguilar-Moreno).



Figure 11. Sun Stone (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 12. Detail of the Sun Stone (photo Manuel Aguilar-Moreno).



Figure 13. Stone of Tizoc (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 14. Stone of Motecuhzoma I (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 15. Detail of Stone of Tizoc (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 16. Atlantes of Tula (photo Manuel Aguilar-Moreno).



Figure 17. Portrait of Motecuzohma II in Chapultepec Park (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 18. The Caracol (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 19. Tlaltecuhтли (photo Manuel Aguilar-Moreno).



Figure 20. Tlaltecuiltli del Metro (photo David Grove).



Figure 21. Coatlicue (photo Fernando González y González).

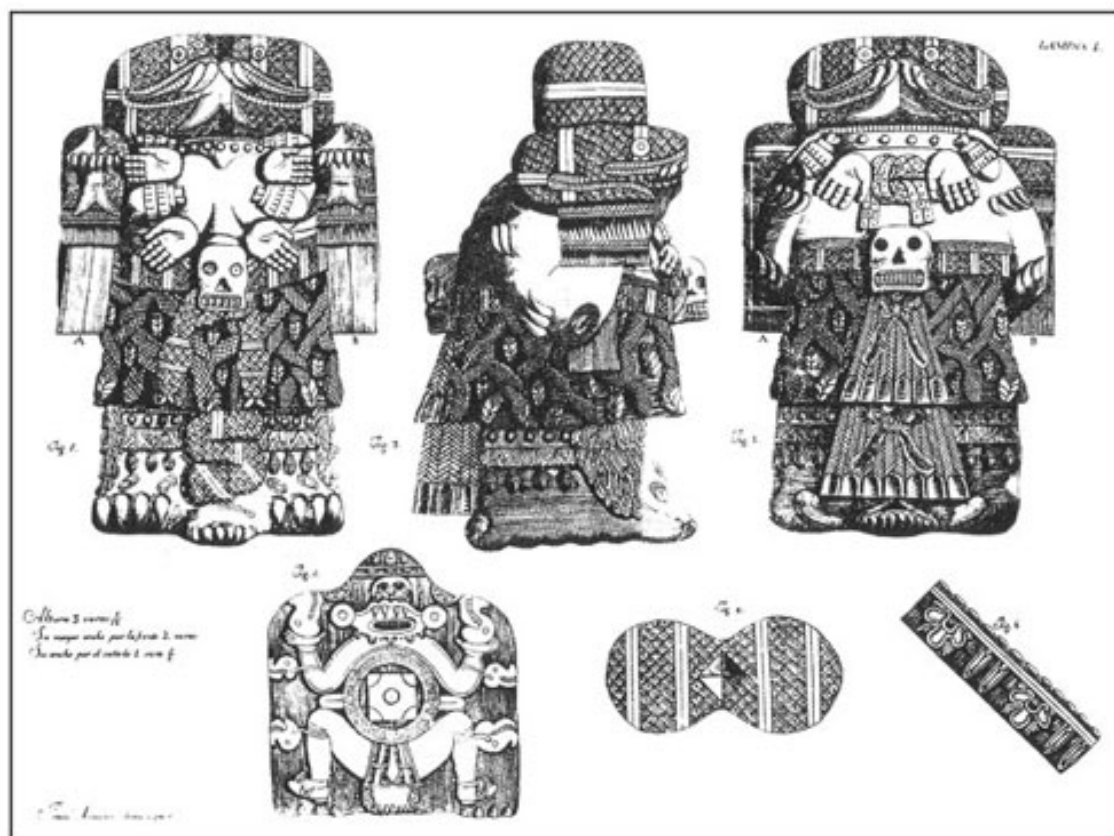


Figure 22. Illustration of Coatlicue by Antonio de León y Gama (drawing Lluvia Arras).



Figure 23. Portrait of the Virgin of Guadalupe (photo Manuel Aguilar-Moreno).



Figure 24. Coatlicue of Coxcatlan (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 25. Cihuacoatl (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 26. Composite Statue of Xiuhtecuhtli-Huitzilopochtli (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 27a. Coyolxauhqui (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 27b. Older Coyolxauhqui Relief (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 28. Head of Coyolxauhqui (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 29. Xochipilli (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 30. Feathered Serpent (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 31. Xiuhtecuhtli (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 32. Chacmool of the Tlaloc Shrine (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 33. Tlaloc-Chacmool (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 34. Chicomecoatl (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 35. Altar with Ears of Corn (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 36. Huehuetēotl (photo Fernando González y González).

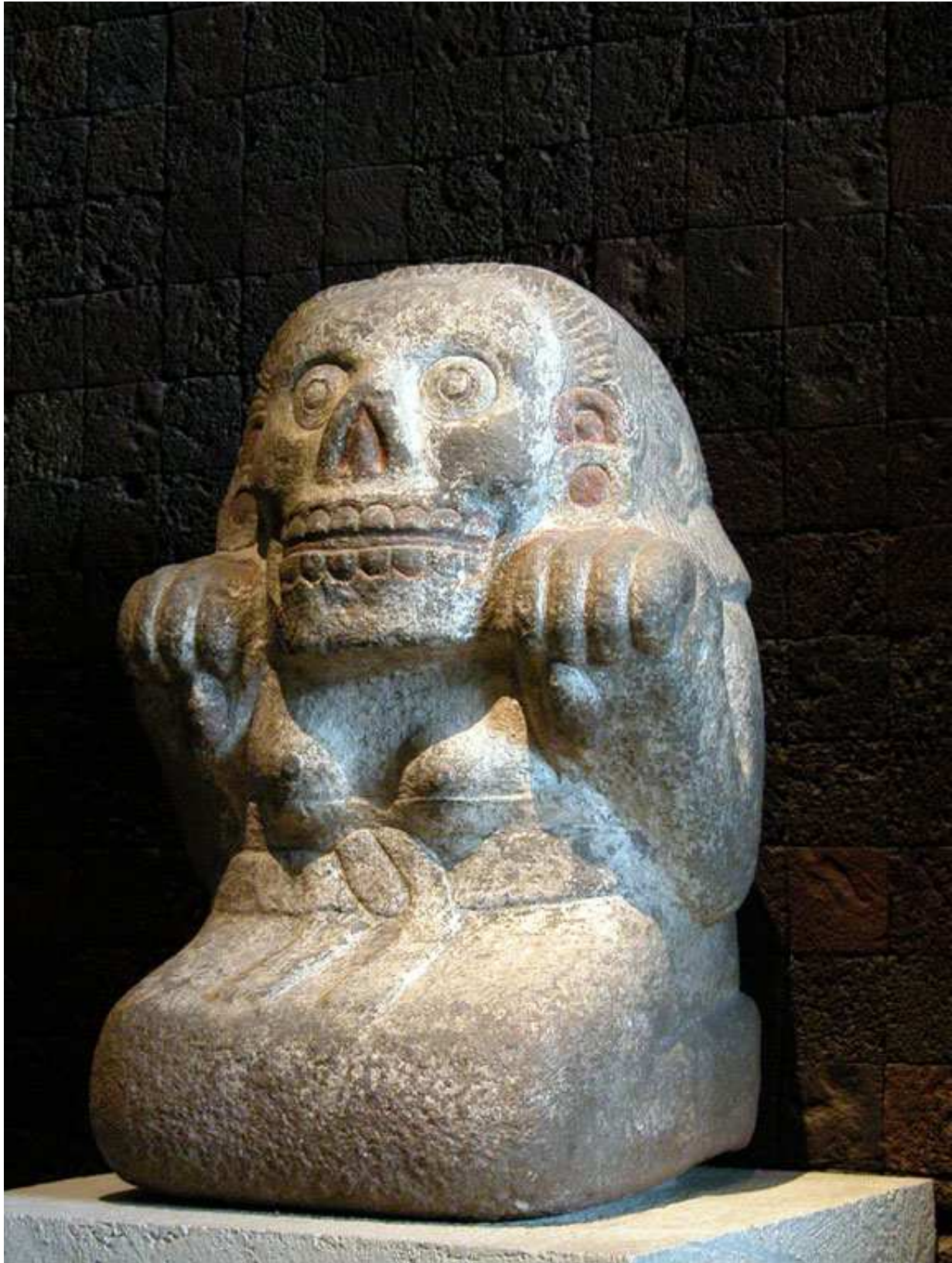


Figure 37. Cihuateotl (photo Fernando González y González).

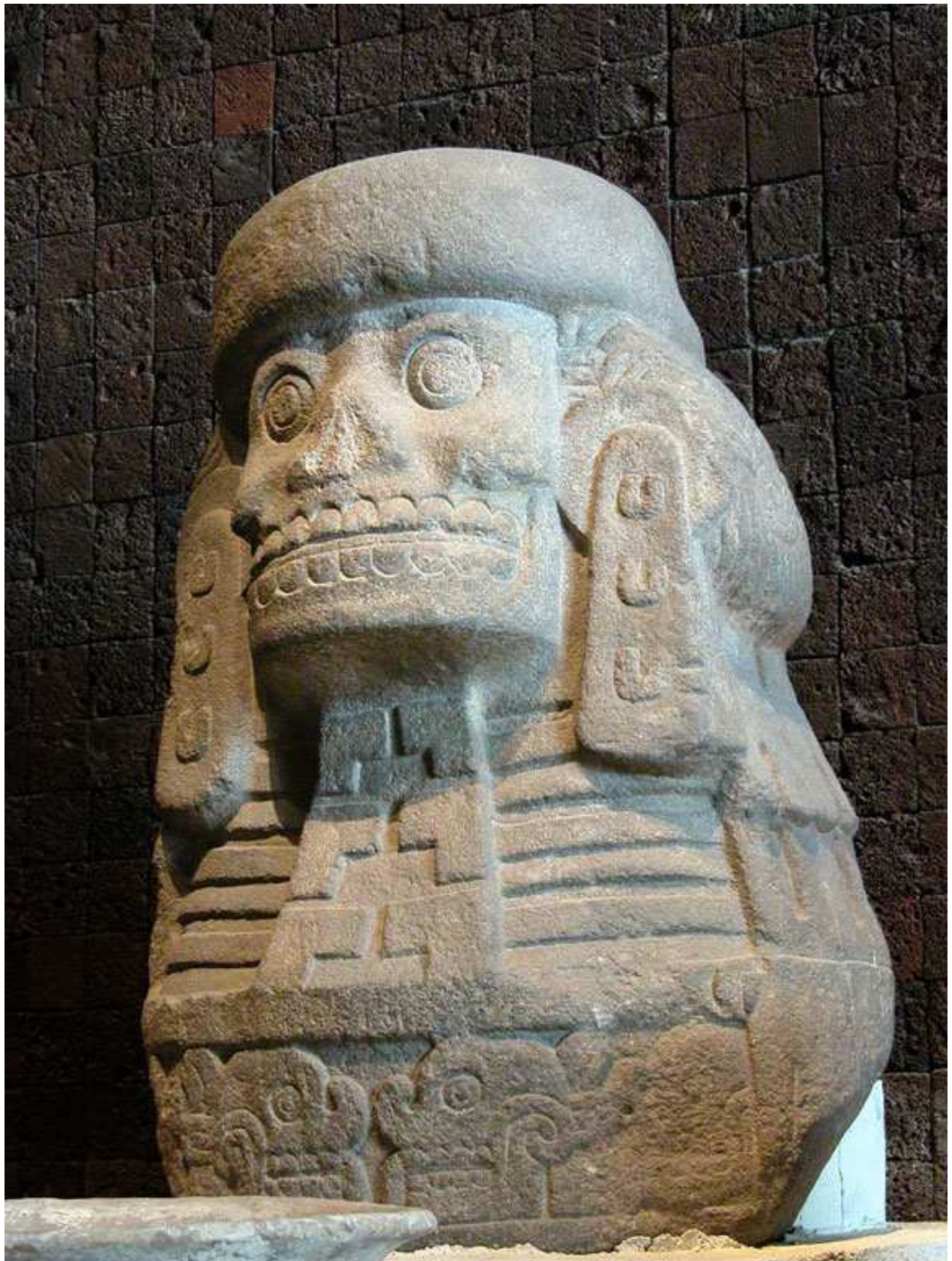


Figure 38. Cihuateotl (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 39. Altar of the Planet Venus (photo Manuel Aguilar-Moreno).



Figure 40. Altar of Itzpapalotl (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 41. Tepetlacalli with Figure Drawing Blood and Zacatapay (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 42. Stone Box of Motecuhzoma II (photo Fernando González y González).

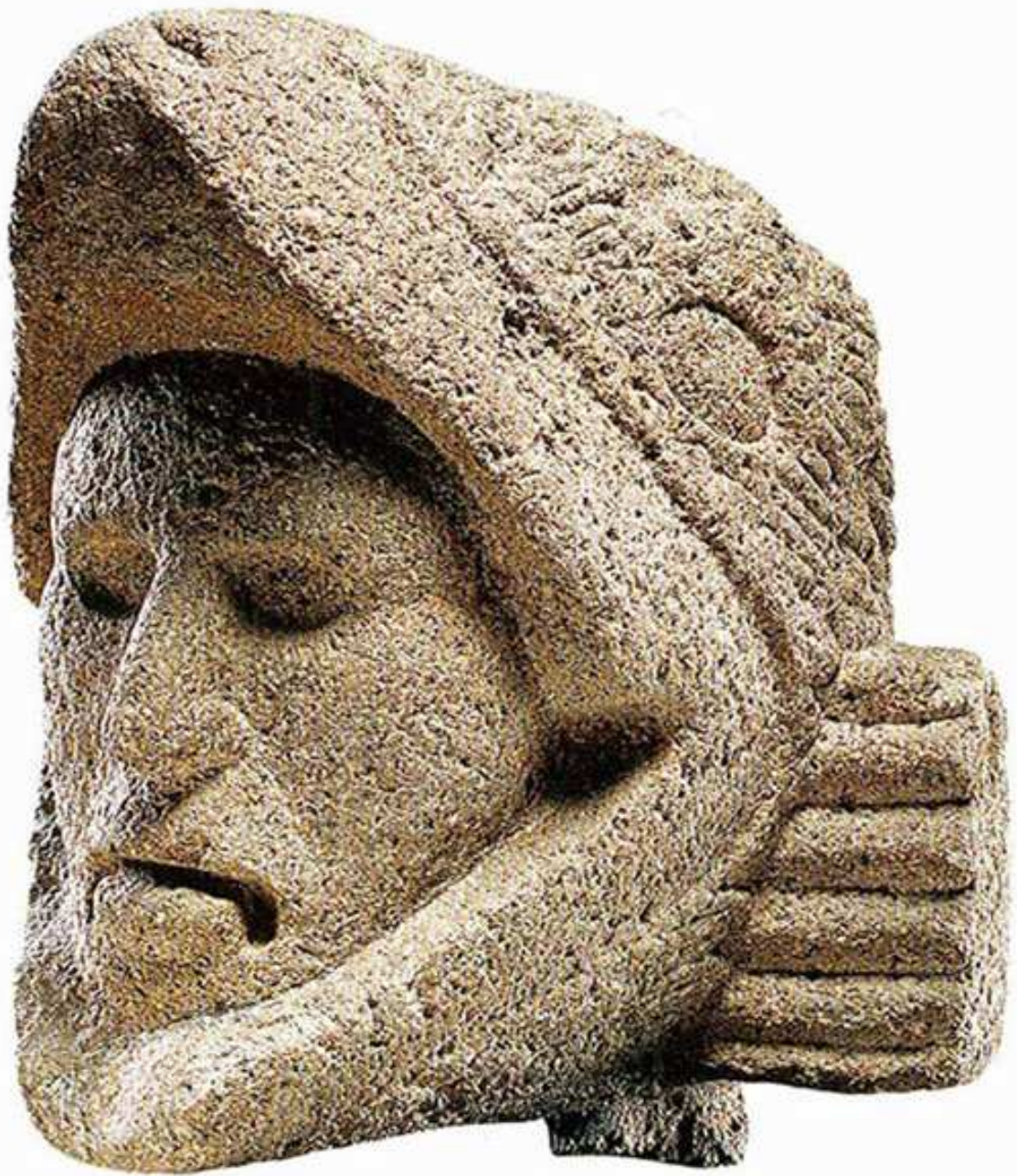


Figure 43. Head of Eagle Warrior (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 44. Jaguar Warrior (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 45. Aztec Atlantean Warrior (photo David Grove).



Figure 46. Feathered Coyote (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 47. Acolman Cross (Manuel Aguilar-Moreno).

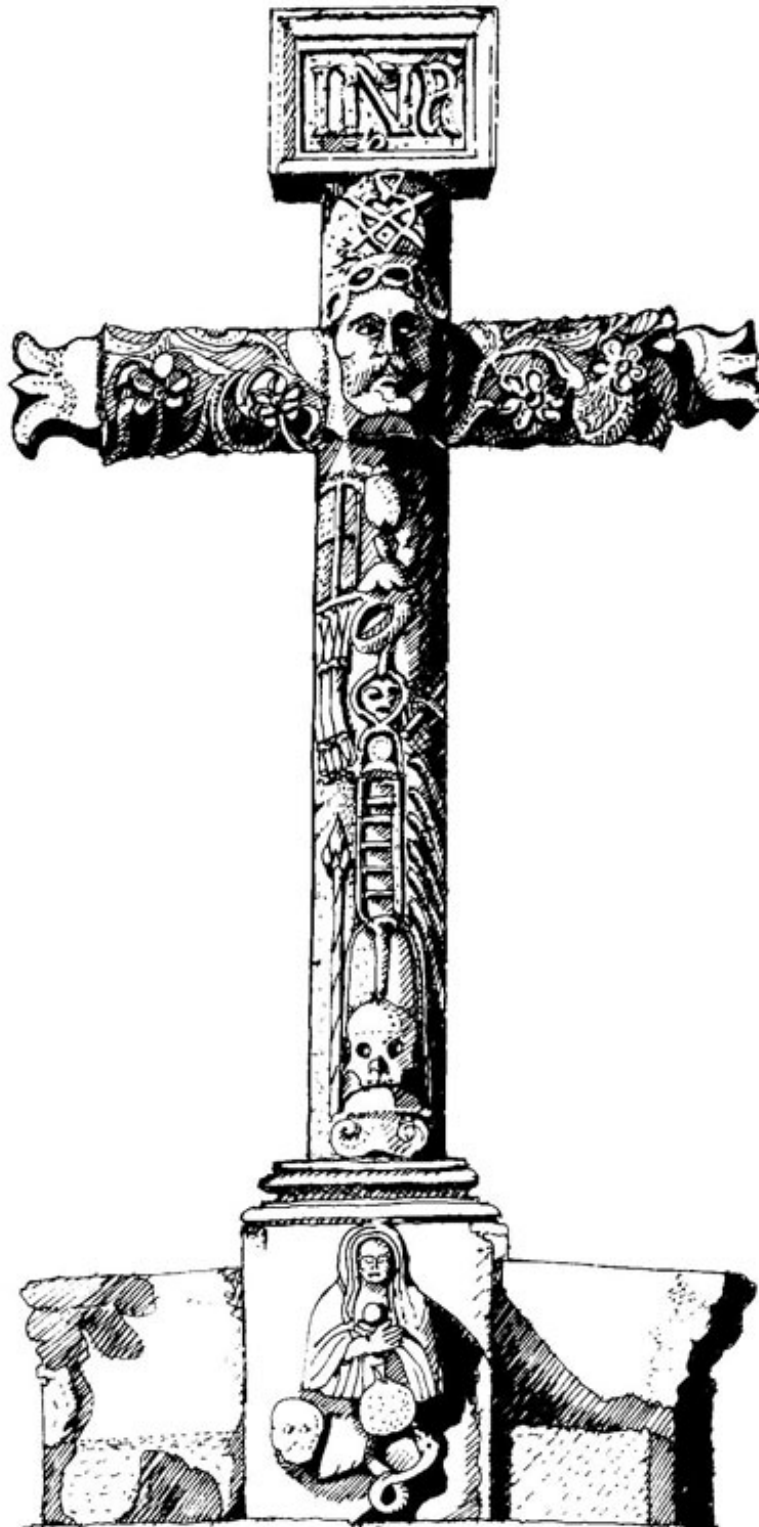


Figure 48. Acolman Cross (drawing Richard Perry).

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